Comprehensive Smart Growth Audit Checklist

Introduction:

The term sprawl has been defined in a number of ways, but perhaps the simplest way to define sprawl is the expansion of developed land at a rate exceeding population growth. Sprawl is typically characterized by:

- Excessive land consumption;
- Low densities in comparison with older centers;
- Lack of choice in ways to travel;
- Fragmented open space, wide gaps between development, and a scattered appearance;
- Lack of choice in housing types and prices;
- Separation of uses into distinct areas;
- Repetitive one-story development;
- Commercial buildings surrounded by acres of parking; and
- Lack of public spaces and community centers.

Sprawl negatively impacts society and the natural landscape in a number of ways. Quality of life is impacted by increasing auto dependency, fuel consumption, and air pollution; increasing commuting times and costs; reducing opportunity for public transportation services; increasing health problems in children and adults due to a sedentary life style; more time in cars and less time for family, friends, and recreation; loss of sense of place and community decline resulting in fragmented and dispersed communities and a decline in social interaction, isolation of some populations, such as the poor and elderly, in urban areas, and a decline in vitality and economic and fiscal viability of existing urban and village centers.

Sprawl impacts the economy by excessive public costs for roads and utility line extensions and service delivery to dispersed development; decline in economic opportunity in traditional centers; premature disinvestment in existing buildings, facilities, and services in urban and village centers; relocation of jobs to peripheral areas at some distance from population centers; decline in number of jobs in some sectors, such as retail; isolation of employees from activity centers, homes, daycare, and schools; and reduced ability to finance public services in urban centers.

Sprawl impacts the environment by fragmenting open space and wildlife habitat; loss of productive farmland and forestland; decline in water quality from increased urban runoff, shoreline development, and loss of wetlands; and inability to capitalize on unique cultural, historic, and public space resources, such as waterfronts, in urban and village centers.

Many communities have adopted master plans that identify the need to preserve the rural character of the community but fail to implement that goal through the zoning ordinance and other land use regulations. In fact, many land use regulations today encourage sprawl development.

Among the causes of sprawl are:

- Public investment in roads, public buildings, water, sewer, and other infrastructure in peripheral areas; disinvestment in existing centers;
- Land regulations that promote spread out, land consumptive development;
- Consumer desire for rural lifestyle with large homes and large yards, safe environment and less traffic congestion;

- Preference of business and industry for easy highway access, plenty of free parking, and corporate identity;
- Demands of commercial tenants for particular locations and designs for buildings and sites;
- Other public policies, including tax policies and utility rate policies;
- Higher costs of development in older, traditional centers;
- Lower land prices in peripheral areas;
- Telecommunications advances; and
- Commercial lending practices that favor suburban development.

The State of New Hampshire, as well as other states throughout the nation and the federal government, has been increasingly concerned about the negative impacts of sprawl. There have been numerous studies, articles, and books completed on the subject within the past decade. Within the planning community, attempts have been made to determine indicators of sprawl and what can be done to resist it.

Smart Growth is an alternative to sprawl development. What is Smart Growth? Smart Growth is growth that fosters economic vitality in community centers while maintaining the rural working landscape. Smart Growth is not about stopping growth; rather it's about directing and managing growth. Smart Growth is about providing choices in where we live and work and in how we get around. Smart Growth uses resources wisely (e.g., farmland with good productivity is actively used, and development on agricultural land is discouraged). The working landscape is preserved and environmental quality is protected. To combat urban sprawl, ten principles of smart growth have been identified. The State of New Hampshire has identified the following eight principles as important to the State.

Principles for Vibrant New Hampshire Communities:

- **Maintain traditional compact settlement patterns** to efficiently use land, resources and infrastructure investments.
- **Foster the traditional character of New Hampshire downtowns, villages, and neighborhoods** by encouraging a human scale of development that is comfortable for pedestrians and conducive to community life.
- **Incorporate a mix of uses** to provide variety of housing, employment, shopping, services and social opportunities for all members of the community.
- **Preserve New Hampshire's working landscape** by sustaining farm and forest land and other rural resource lands to maintain contiguous tracts of open land and to minimize land use conflicts.
- **Provide choices and safety in transportation** to create livable, walkable communities that increase accessibility for people of all ages, whether on foot, bicycle, or in motor vehicles.
- **Protect environmental quality** by minimizing impacts from human activities and planning for and maintaining natural areas that contribute to the health and quality of life of communities and people in New Hampshire.
- **Involve the community** in planning and implementation to ensure that development retains and enhances the sense of place, traditions, goals, and values of the local community.
- **Manage growth locally in the New Hampshire tradition, but work with neighboring towns** to achieve common goals and more effectively address common problems.

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To assist citizens and community planners in understanding what sprawl is and how to implement the principles of Smart Growth, the Office of Energy and Planning (NH OEP) has recently completed a publication entitled *Achieving Smart Growth in New Hampshire*. This report documents how New Hampshire is changing and highlights some positive examples of development and conservation throughout New Hampshire. The report is now available online at www.state.nh.us/osp/ and on CD-ROM. Smart Growth provides a variety of ways to help a community grow without overextending its resources. These strategies have been designed to allow for growth while allowing the town to keep its rural character and identity. The cohesiveness of a master plan with the zoning ordinance and other land use regulations is the key factor in this respect.

Comprehensive Smart Growth Audit Checklist for New Hampshire Communities

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Community: _____, New Hampshire

TOPIC	DOCUMENT	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Density				
Do land use regulations establish minimum densities to promote efficient use of lands designated for higher densities?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: To encourage this, the Town could identify minimums with respect to multi family.**
Commentary: *Underuse of residential lands, due to building at lower densities than planned or zoned, results in the land consumption for residential use that is faster than planned. Therefore, more land is needed for residential uses which probably means that land needs will be satisfied by removing more land from productive agricultural use in the outlying areas. One way to achieve more efficient land use for residential development is to establish minimum densities in areas where it is very important that planned densities be achieved (e.g., around transit centers or in areas master planned for sewer and/or water service).*				
Do minimum lot sizes allow for urban-sized lots?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Min. lot size in Village District is _ acre.**
Commentary: *Zoning ordinances should provide a portion of single-family zoning devoted to single-family development on lots of 10,000 – 15,000 square feet in areas served by sewer and water.*				
Urban Form				
Does the zoning ordinance zone much of the fringe land as exclusively agricultural (i.e., a holding category) or with a substantial minimum lot size that discourages single-family tract housing and preserves large sites for viable farm use?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: The Rural/Agricultural District does allow for agricultural uses. The min. lot size, however, is 2 acres.**
Commentary: *Smart growth means that land use controls inhibit the scattering of low-density residential uses at the urban fringe, a condition that constitutes the epitome of sprawl.*				
Land Use				
Does the local zoning ordinance provide at least one or more zoning districts that allow mixes of residential and commercial uses?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: The Village & Commercial/Recreational Districts allow for a mixture of residential & commercial uses. It does not specify if they are allowed on the same property or within the same structure.**
If the community has a downtown, are residential uses allowed in the central business zoning district?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Manufactured housing is not permitted in the Village District.**
Do the future land use plan and zoning ordinance allow for compatible, small-scale neighborhood commercial uses (e.g., corner stores) adjacent to or within residential neighborhoods?	Master Plan/ Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Allowed within the Village District**

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Does the local zoning ordinance provide for traditional neighborhood development (TND)?	Zoning Ordinance			
Are home occupation regulations flexible enough to allow a wide variety of telework activities while maintaining the peace and quiet of the neighborhoods in which they are located?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Allowed within the Village and Rural/Agricultural Districts**

Commentary: *Mixing of land uses is a major tenet of smart growth. Plan policies and land use regulations should provide for, and even encourage, mixed land uses, especially residential and commercial. Such mixtures allow people to work and reside in the same area, sometimes even in the same building. It is generally accepted that mixing land uses allows for walking more and reduces vehicle miles traveled, which can help to improve air quality and relieve traffic congestion.*

Jobs – Housing Balance

Do planned unit development (PUD) regulations provide for an approximate mixture of housing and jobs, or do they result in predominantly single-family residential development with no jobs nearby?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: The town does not have a PUD ordinance.**

Commentary: *The concept of jobs-housing balance holds that communities should plan for a rough match between the number of jobs and the number of housing units. A desirable range is approximately 1.5 housing units for every job in the community. Plans should also investigate whether the characteristics of housing in the community match the needs of workers residing in the community and whether the types of jobs in the community match the skills of the resident work force (i.e., consider the "qualitative" aspects of balance). A quantitative balance of jobs and housing does not necessarily signal smart growth, especially if there are qualitative mismatches between jobs and housing.*

Open Space/Green Space

Do all (or most) zoning districts require a minimum open space ratio (i.e., percentage of land area for each development that must be open space)?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: A 50% set-aside of common open space is required for cluster subdivisions.**
Do land use regulations require developers to consider connecting open spaces and greenways to existing destinations and open space reservations?	Zoning Ordinance			
Do local land use regulations provide for "conservation subdivisions" or "cluster subdivisions" as a matter of right (versus requiring a conditional use permit or special exception)?	Zoning Ordinance/ Subdivision Regulations			**Example: Cluster subdivisions are allowed by right in the Rural/Agricultural and Commercial/Recreational Districts.**

Commentary: *Open space, conservation, and cluster subdivision practices are effective ways of setting aside green space and open space. Local regulations are not smart unless they provide for and even encourage these types of subdivisions. When clustering or conservation designs are not allowed, developers subdivide land into individual lots that rarely preserve natural features and open space.*

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Energy Conservation				
Do land use regulations require the planting of shade trees around new subdivision roads and within parking lots?	Zoning Ordinance/ Subdivision Regulations			**Example: Planting trees or requiring development to retain trees along roads assists in the reduction of energy that is lost on roads and parking lots while providing rural character.**
Does the community have guidelines for designing development sites and buildings for energy efficiency?	Design Guidelines			**Example: Energy efficient buildings and site design can provide alternative uses to energy consumption which reduces resource consumption.**
Does the local zoning code provide an option for encouraging subdivisions to use solar power?	Zoning Ordinance			

Commentary: *There are multiple ways a local plan can promote energy conservation. For instance, tree protection ordinances help retain and enhance shade, which reduces cooling costs. Shade tree requirements along streets and parking lots provide aesthetic benefits in addition to helping to attain energy conservation objectives. Local governments can adopt design guidelines for energy efficient buildings and site designs. Though more popular in the 1970s than today, changing local codes to facilitate efficient energy use can promote the design of subdivisions with solar access, which then facilitates solar panels and cells for domestic energy use.*

Water Quality				
Do local land use regulations prohibit development within, and the filling of floodways and floodplains?	Zoning Ordinance/ Other Regulations			**Example: Bennington does have a Floodplain Development Ordinance.**
Have the community's development regulations been revamped recently to encourage or require best management practices for water quality?	Various Land Use Regulations			**Example: The state expects Best Management Practices to be used, but specific regulations have not been adopted by Bennington.**
Does the local jurisdiction have water-quality ordinances in place?	Various Land Use Regulations			
Has the community instituted programs of water-quality monitoring and other related programs to ensure total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) are not exceeded?	Various Land Use Regulations			**Example: May be relevant for ponds and lakes with higher densities of permanent and seasonal dwellings.**

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Housing				
Do the provisions within at least some of the residential zoning districts allow for a wide range of housing types by right (versus requiring a conditional use permit or special exception)?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Housing choices for residents could be increased by: allowing manufactured housing in all residential areas of town, and by allowing accessory apartments by right within all residential areas of town.**
Do local regulations allow for mixed-income housing developments?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Allowing single family, duplexes, manufactured housing, and multi family in the same development allows for diversified income housing.**
If the housing needs assessment identifies a need for multi-family residences, does the zoning ordinance provide sufficient vacant land to meet future needs?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: There is no current housing needs assessment for the town; the current one is for the region. There are no provisions for multi-family development in town.**
Does the zoning ordinance allow for "accessory apartments" within single-family residential zoning districts?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Accessory apartments are allowed in all residential areas by Special Exception.**
Are manufactured homes a use permitted outright in at least one residential zoning district?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Housing choices for residents could be increased by allowing manufactured housing in all residential areas of town.**
Are minimum lot sizes set low enough in at least one residential zoning district to provide for homeownership for all income classes?	Zoning Ordinance			**Example: Min. lot size in the Village District is _ acre. Min. lot size in other residential districts is 2 acres.**

Commentary: *Exclusionary zoning is the opposite of smart growth. A community's zoning regulations are smart only if they provide reasonable and fair opportunities for diverse housing types and price ranges. Local governments can accomplish smart growth by reducing minimum lot sizes, eliminating or lowering minimum house sizes, providing for manufactured homes in one or more residential zoning districts, allowing accessory apartments, and encouraging apartment development where needed.*

Transportation				
Do development regulations have some	Various Land			

TOPIC	DOCUMENT	YES	NO	COMMENTS
requirement to consider and if appropriate provide for new local streets at designated intervals (e.g., every 1,500 feet)?	Use Regulations			

Commentary: *Over time, planners have learned that in addition to over reliance on automobile travel, a major cause of traffic congestion is the design of road systems. Conventional thinking, which is not considered smart growth, calls for local roads to empty onto collector roads that often empty onto a single (or few) arterials. Because so few major routes of travel are available, traffic is concentrated on these few roads, resulting in congestion. Smart growth demands a road network with more than one means of through travel in any given area.*

Have street standards been revised to lower any excessive requirements for local subdivision streets?	Various Land Use Regulations			**Example: Subdivision Regulations have not been revised since 1988. No pavement width standards.**

Commentary: *Many suburban street standards require excessive pavement widths for streets (e.g., from 29 to 36 feet). Smart growth means local streets are placed on a "diet" so that" skinny" streets result. Narrowing required pavement width (e.g., to 24 feet or less) reduces development costs and impervious surfaces, and may increase safety by lowering vehicle speeds.*

Are sidewalks required within new residential subdivisions (in town center)?	Subdivision Regulations			**Example: Sidewalks provide a safe and alternate means of transportation.**
Do land use regulations encourage or require the provision of bike paths in accordance with a bikeway master plan?	Various Land Use Regulations			**Example: The Town does not have a bikeway master plan.**
Do development regulations require the installation of a sidewalk along existing public streets abutting the development, where such sidewalk does not already exist (in town center)?	Various Land Use Regulations			**Exampe: No sidewalk regulations.**
Do subdivision regulations allow the planning board or local governing body to require the connection of subdivision streets to existing streets and the stubbing of streets to allow connections to future subdivision developments?	Subdivision Regulations			**Example: The existing language in the Subdivision Regulations should be strengthened.**
Do land use regulations encourage, if not mandate, the provision of interparcel connections between individual developments, where compatible?	Various Land Use Regulations			

Commentary: *Smart growth includes the objective of reducing reliance on major thoroughfares. Requiring driveways to connect with adjacent store parking lots, for example, is one way to reduce traffic on nearby thoroughfares.*

Parking

Do parking regulations require excessive on-site parking requirements?	Zoning Ordinance			

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Do land use regulations include maximum parking ratios (i.e., a cap on the number of parking spaces that can be built in a particular development) in addition to minimum parking requirements?	Zoning Ordinance			
Do parking regulations provide for reductions of on-site spaces in places where transit is available?	Zoning Ordinance			
Is on-street parking allowed in places where it can be safely provided, such as in downtown areas and pedestrian retail districts?	Zoning Ordinance			

Commentary: *Planners and policy makers now realize that minimum parking requirements in land use codes have been excessive, as evidenced by the vast numbers of unused parking spaces in many parking lots. Smart growth means the reduction of excessive parking requirements and the creation of maximum parking thresholds for commercial, residential, and other developments.*

Do engineering construction specifications for parking lots allow for porous pavements where appropriate?	Construction Specifications			**No provisions specified in regulations on type of material required for parking.**

Commentary: *Porous pavements are environmentally smart because they allow the flow of stormwater into the ground, rather than as polluted runoff into streams and/or detention structures. There has been little research, however, to show that these pavements are viable alternatives to impervious surfaces. Generally, porous pavements are not designed to handle heavy loads such as garbage trucks. Practices today generally limit porous paving materials to overflow parking and areas that are not heavily used. Porous pavements also require provisions for cleaning or vacuuming the "pores"; without regular maintenance, they will become clogged and will no longer function as designed. Pavement engineers should be consulted when considering regulations allowing porous pavements.*

Water, Sewer, and Other Infrastructure

Do water and sewer facility master plans provide for the systematic extension of future trunk water and sewer extensions into areas designated for development in the short-term versus allowing such lines to be extended without restraint anywhere in the community?	Water/Sewer Plan			**Example: Town does not have a water and/or sewer facility master plan.**

Commentary: *Some communities designate "urban service boundaries" beyond which the local government will not extend public water and sewer lines. Smart growth means tying facility planning and land use together. Controlling infrastructure is one of the most powerful means of guiding the urban form of a community.*

Permitting Process

Have land development permitting processes been comprehensively reviewed to identify opportunities for eliminating duplication, unfairness, excessive and unnecessary requirements, etc.? If so, have inefficient processes been reformed?	Special Study/ Various Land Use Regulations			**Example: The Subdivision Regulations have not been amended since 1988; the Site Plan Review Regulations have not been amended since 1988.**